

MEETING SUMMARY
SAN JUAN ISLANDS VRS COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP MEETING
SAN JUAN ISLAND YACHT CLUB, FRIDAY HARBOR, WA
Thursday, January 31, 2013 2:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Note: This meeting summary represents notes from the Washington State Department of Transportation Ferries Division (WSF) Partnership Group Meeting, and is not a formal transcript or minutes. It is provided as a record for the staff, group members and public in attendance, and other interested parties.

Welcome

David Moseley, WSDOT Assistant Secretary

David welcomed the group members and made some opening remarks.

Meeting Overview & Items from Last Time

Heather Rogers, BERK & Associates

Heather went over the agenda and suggested that group members join the Google Group. She expressed that if members cannot make it to meetings, alternates should not be sent to represent them in the interest of keeping the meetings moving without having to bring people up to speed on past meeting discussions. Heather also pointed out that several island Terminal Agents had joined the meeting.

Better Trip-Planning Information for Customers

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian discussed the ways WSF is working on providing better information to customers (see page 2 of the handout packet).

Questions & Comments

1. (Wally Gudgell) I don't understand why the mobile app is being delayed. The demographic of the islands is a younger group of people; mobile communications are what people are using.
We have noticed the rise in mobile usage and we are working on it.
So you're on top of making advancements in mobile apps for ferry reservations and communications.
That is one of our goals; we are working on it.
2. (Clark Johnson) I imagine your reservations team already has its plate full; is this an explicit thing or is it under the radar? Is this a priority for specific staff to work on?
The mobile app is part of the larger picture; right now we are working on putting the best times to travel on our website on a month to month basis.
3. (Carol Anderson) The current DOT app, can you include a webcam on that?
We have cameras already, when you go to Vessel Watch each island has a camera now. We are looking at adding a link there to take you to the best times to travel information. With Phase 2 we are looking at adding more cameras with better visibility.

4. (John Brantigan) The Vessel Watch is terrific, I use that all the time. Is it real-time updated or delayed?
It is not real-time, but we are looking at updating it so it will reflect real-time data. That would be helpful; also color-coding the boats that are overloaded would be nice. Good suggestion.
5. (Clark Johnson) When we met I mentioned that I would like to get access to real-time data and I can add that onto the service. David said you would look into it; lead time for me is important.
For the March schedule we will work with you in February. It's a great tool that Clark provides. We are only working with ticketing information right now, which is not available in "real-time."
6. (Bill Pike) A huge part of this is educating the public by radio, traffic signs, or your website if vessels are overloaded. The situation is usually sudden and close to departure time; an app is great but until it is developed, do that.
We don't have the ability to do that yet; we are working on it.
The overhead message sign when you're driving through Bellingham tells you about the wait at the border; that is incredibly helpful. I understand your stuff is more complicated.
We are looking at what we could employ in the future: how long is the line outside of the tollbooth, how many cars are in the holding area, etc. We don't have the ability to collect that information right now, but we are looking into getting it. The variable message signs are something we have looked at as well, we just don't have the funding yet.
7. (Ken Burtness) I want to support the idea of getting information to people. In the 37 years I lived on the islands and worked for WSF I had the information in my head because I did it all the time. I've been retired long enough that I'm losing that information; it's getting more difficult to make travel decisions. This is an opportunity for you to give that information to everybody. Clark is doing great, the best times to travel provides some information, but Clark's is more understandable. It goes to show what can be accomplished—he's doing it for free in his spare time. Why not make each sailing in your online schedule a link that takes you to information about that sailing?
We agree; we are looking at those things.
8. (Jim Corenman) AM radio, is that worth the money?
We will discuss that more in the breakout sessions.
We make decisions based on the internet.
Some people may not have access to the internet.
9. (Gordon Jonasson) I don't think people know how significant this work Clark is doing is. Also, I would like to point out that BC Ferries has signs up just north of Sidney; it's all there.
10. (Howie Rosenfeld) Coming up I-5 to Anacortes, I want to know what's going on, but it may be more than a quick glance at a sign could handle. Maybe if you had the information available at the rest stops.
11. (Carol Anderson) When I'm in Mount Vernon I can get on islandcam.com and see the entire Anacortes parking lot. On the DOT site you can only see the first part of the parking lot and the road. Can you put up a camera that matches the islandcam one? I know which lanes are which from experience, and I can make my decisions from Mount Vernon. Having that extra camera would be wonderful.

We will look into that.

Phase 1 Outcomes

Heather Rogers, BERK & Associates

Heather discussed customer survey results and the Phase 1 Closeout Report (see additional handouts provided at the meeting).

Questions & Comments

1. (Wally Gudgell) You didn't mention the different account types.
We have three account types right now: Universal, which is anyone, it just stores your information for ease of use; Premier, which is just for Port Townsend/Coupeville right now, for frequent riders to make multiple reservations without paying a deposit; and Executive, which is for commercial users in Port Townsend/Coupeville and in the San Juan Islands.
2. (Ken Burtness) The thing that I found surprising was when they talked about the experience with the webpage, one time users, basically tourists, found it easier to use than those that use it all the time.
That is because frequent users are trying to make multiple trip reservations at the same time, so we just recently made a change so that people can make reoccurring reservations all in one transaction. One of our topics for the next meeting is the needs of frequent users in the San Juans.
3. (Pat McKay) I love the reoccurring reservations, I used it this morning and it worked great.
4. (Howie Rosenfeld) This is a great report; it looks like it has lots of good information. There are lots of questions up here about how breakdowns and delays were handled, and also the computer glitch issues at rollout. Another thing of interest to this group is what was budgeted for the first phase and what was actually spent.
The budget was 4.97 million for the first phase, and we are within that budget. It was a rough go during the summer rollout, but we learned a lot from the experience that we can move forward with. We found that the system was slow, but we got the initial seven minute transaction time down to two minutes by continuously working to fix the issues and make them better. We expect it to be better here because you have an existing system, and we are focused on making sure we have the bandwidth to handle the extra usage. As to the service disruption piece, we had a plan and when disruptions happened we deployed our process. We notified customers by email that the sailing was cancelled, then we relaxed the rules and said if you want to come go ahead, if not we will refund your deposit. It worked well. We will be discussing how to handle it here, how to treat drive-ups versus reservations; there is much to discuss around that issue. We also looked at reservation allocations, and when we knew there might be fog we lowered the allocation; the system is flexible enough to allow those tweaks. For President's Day weekend coming up we are raising the reservation allocation to 80% to see what happens; we did the same at Thanksgiving and that was a success. We do plan to bring the data from Port Townsend/Coupeville to future meetings so we can discuss this.

5. (Susan Young) What prompts the decision that 80% makes the system work? It sounds like an experiment. What documentation do you have that supports the contention that there will be growth in the system in the near future?
We have no documentation other than the fact that Port Townsend/Coupeville has shown growth during the period from 2011-2012. It is our hope that ridership will grow, but that is not the core reason for a reservation system; the direction from the Legislature is to make our demand management better.
6. (Gordon Jonasson) How does the public know you have changed the allocation?
We communicate that on our website. When you go online you can see the number of spaces available per sailing, which spaces are reservable and which are drive-up. Before noon we do 50%, then a larger percentage in the afternoon. As to the question of where we get the 80% number, we are trying to find the right percentage where we aren't doing so many that we can't process them in time, but enough so that we see the demand being properly managed.
7. (Gordon Jonasson) I'm going to get a USB port installed in my body; you don't want anyone to talk to each other anymore.
8. (Bill Pike) Year over year increases in traffic, when did the problem occur?
2007, when the Steel Electrics were pulled from service.
Are we seeing an increase now?
Overall, ridership is down.
Are you back to where you were before?
No.
9. (Melissa Johnson) I compared last year to the year before, and traffic to Friday Harbor did increase over last summer.
10. (Deborah Hopkins) I want to let you know that a growth trend will be tied to tourism, and tourism to the islands increased 15% in 2012 over 2011. Let me know if you need numbers on that sort of thing.
11. (Wally Gudgell) The summertime is when the capacity issues are. The island population is fixed except for when people are using their homes as rental properties; it seems like it should be easy to figure out what the occupancy is.
12. (Clark Johnson) I am glad to get this Phase 1 Report. Page one says the purpose is to comment on three goals; I don't think you are emphasizing enough that you just don't know. It's not clear from the data you have that reservations have had any impact on demand management. Two points do not make a trend, you need at least three, and you use one day to tell us what happened for an entire summer. Your surveys are terrific to demonstrate that you have been sensitive to your citizens' needs but they don't say anything about the people themselves. It doesn't tell us whether your customers in the community at large are engaged and ready to take advantage of it.
Twice a year I go to the Port Townsend and Coupeville communities and talk about what's going on. For the last three years reservations have been a large part of the conversation. I can tell you anecdotally, most people attending those meetings really like what reservations have done for traffic management in downtown Port Townsend. It's the people who don't show up at meetings that I want to see what they know or don't know.
I do those meetings with the Economic Development Group.
I'll stop there.

13. (Melissa Johnson) I want to support this team; they worked with the terminal agents not only at Port Townsend/Coupeville but with the agents up here as well. They've worked tirelessly to improve the system, communicating regularly with these agents so that they were able to provide their input. That is not mentioned in this report, but going forward they will be involved. I'm hugely supportive of this.

Lopez and Shaw

David Moseley, WSDOT Assistant Secretary

David discussed the options for reservations eastbound from Lopez and Shaw islands (see Lopez/Shaw handout). After going over congestion levels and costs, David made the point that he is leaning toward Option 4: No Reservations.

Questions & Comments

1. (Gordon Jonasson) It is important that you retain the eastbound allocations.
Those will not change.
What about the westbound allocations?
We need to discuss that, but that's not for this meeting.
2. (Kathy Keller) I'm familiar with the traffic patterns at Lopez; we have two boats that are a problem: the 9:30 and the 2:40, because of the small allotment. I personally would like to eliminate any sailings with less than a 30 car allotment. I cannot imagine spending this amount of capital funds on reservations.
3. (Ken Burtness) I would like to add that if we drop eastbound reservations we not drop the other things we've talked about to help. Can we keep the webcams; they help us even without a reservations system.
We can look at that; people from Lopez have convinced us that you have an effective island communication system now. Separate from the web based communications we talked about earlier, the hardware improvements were intended to support the reservations system.
4. (Kathy Keller) The line at Lopez disappears from view up the hill; it would be nice if there was a camera so we know how long that line is.
We can talk about those details during the small group discussions.
5. (Bill Pike) I assume that passing on eastbound reservations for those islands now does not preclude you from looking at it again in the future?
Correct.
What if they want it after they see what Orcas and San Juan get?
The basis for this decision is based on the data, the numbers. I have heard your thoughts on Lopez but the decision is actually based on the cost/benefit.
6. (Clark Johnson) Thank you. In our discussions as a group we looked at how this would benefit WSF and we don't think it does. As an adjunct to what Ken was saying, if you give us a budget we can give you a proposal, ideas that can help our community.
We can talk about that.
7. (Wally Gudgell) Wanting reservations seems to be need-based. Looking at the graph of Lopez shows us why they are not as interested in it as we are. If the allotment thing changes, which I think it should because it's not fair, they may want to pursue this in the future.

8. (John Brantigan) I represent Shaw on the Ferry Advisory Committee; there is no interest on Shaw for vehicle reservations. We would prefer not to have eastbound reservations because you would have to add a second person, and there's no place to stage the cars; it's the same at Lopez.

David asked the group if anyone disagreed with the decision to not implement eastbound reservations from Shaw and Lopez.

9. (Clark Johnson) I would like more clarity on what the implications are for Lopez and Shaw; will we now be excluded from the westbound discussion?
Not at all, we are still inclined to have reservations westbound to all four islands.

Heather went around the room and asked the group if they agreed with the decision (all members were in agreement).

10. (Gordon Jonasson) I think you made this decision based on the numbers and that's good, thank you. When we sat down and looked at the data it became obvious who needs it the most; Orcas hurts the worst.
11. (Wally Gudge) Then we should get Lopez's allocation.
12. (Cass Clark) Thank you David for this decision. I appreciate how hard it is on Orcas and San Juan Island; I have a new appreciation for that now.

Capital Improvements

Heather Rogers, BERK & Associates

Heather gave an overview of the capital improvements being discussed for each island (see pages 3-15 of the handout packet). Heather asked the group to split into three smaller groups to discuss Lopez, Orcas, and San Juan Islands specifically.

Questions & Comments

1. (David Dubbell) Before we break into groups I would like to discuss why we would go backward into the 20th century with AM radio? Capital dollars are precious; let's spend them on 21st century technology. Society has changed; people operate on the web and on their mobile devices.
We question whether these are the right decisions, that's what we want to know from the small groups.
This is not island specific. Information must be readily accessible from the bottom up.
So your priority would be web-based rather than static solutions.
Everybody is saying that, I don't think anybody wants a radio signal.
2. (Jim Corenman) You have a list of the Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) items, web-based stuff isn't on the list and it should be.
There are two separate budgets, a capital piece and then a separate software budget. We are talking about the capital side today because these items have a long lead time.
The wireless access points are not public access, correct?
Correct.
Is it worthwhile for WSF to provide public internet access around the terminals?

We can look at that.

3. (Wally Gudge) AM radio is a dinosaur. I know it's hard for the DOT to get app writers in because they can't compete with the wages of Google and Amazon. We are planning for the future here and the next generation does everything from their smartphones; that's how they communicate. I think we are unanimous in our wish for you to get with the web-based thing. We don't need transmitters. We want to be careful with how our tax dollars are spent; we want them spent the right way.
4. (Bill Pike) I don't own a smartphone; you are talking about accessing information from a handheld device and I don't use one. There is also the issue of distracted driving.
5. (Wally Gudge) I'm not advocating that, the DOT isn't either; it doesn't need to be part of the discussion. Look at the demographic age of who's in this group—it's different for the next generation, they do everything online.
6. (Carol Anderson) If we're coming up with systems that people use regularly, let's check with the visitors bureaus; they know about the people that come to the island. I have not seen a lot of people who would not use a handheld device; I don't even provide phones in my rentals anymore because everyone brings a cell.
7. (Bill Pike) That makes sense, but if I'm driving and see a sign telling me to tune to an AM radio station, I'm inclined to do that rather than stop and pull out my smartphone, although I admit I am not at the forefront of personal technology.
8. (Pat McKay) I don't have a smartphone either, but I also agree with Wally. We want to know the information before we get there, not right before we arrive at the ferry landing and have to sit for five hours.
9. (David Dubbell) Within WSDOT, is there a dialogue acknowledging that there is stuff coming from the bottom up? We have a hunger; we need information that is timely and safely delivered.

Yes, our IT unit is forward thinking; they are very skilled. What we are hearing from you is that we need to rethink the Highway and Terminal Advisory Radios (HARs & TARs), and use that money to expedite web-based solutions. We have heard you. The pre-design study for this system was three years ago, and even after only three years some things need to be rethought out. HARs and TARs are pretty standard DOT technology; you see HARs signs on I-5. The concept is more than 15 years old. Web cams are meant to help you before you leave your home; the intent of HARs is for tourists that are heading down the highway and don't know to check the web. That way you catch them at decision points before arriving at the terminal. We have found from the experience at Port Townsend/Coupeville that tourists are usually coming to a hotel or bed and breakfast; maybe we can encourage the lodging community to communicate to their customers the best ways to get information about ferry travel.

10. (David Dubbell) I understand what you are saying about catching people at decision points, but I think you are proposing early 20th century stuff here; people coming to the islands are going to a B&B or onto Expedia.com. Those are the places you need to link up to and be visible; society has changed.
11. (Jim Corenman) I second what WSF is saying about the westbound trip. There is a decision point at I-5 exit 229, where you go to Costco or to the ferry line; it's different than when you are coming from the islands.
12. (Clark Johnson) For the person driving down the road on the way to Friday Harbor for the first time who doesn't know how to make contact, the key is they need to have been informed by everything they touch, the web, the tourist agency, etc. This is where your

money should go. Everybody knows that if you want to get on an airplane you have to make a reservation, because they have been educated; we need to reeducate our customers.

David asked that HARs and TARs be taken off the table for the small group discussions; WSF needs to reevaluate that option. The group split into three smaller groups to discuss other low cost ways to improve communications.

Small Group Discussion Summaries

Heather Rogers, BERK & Associates

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for VRS

Dwight Hutchinson, WSF VRS Manager

The Orcas group asked for an electronic status board. The group liked the idea of moving the tollbooth, and agreed with all the other items listed on page 11 of the packet.

The Lopez group asked for cameras, one up the county road and one in the holding area from the back side. The rest of the discussion was about ways to market and communicate the best times to travel to vacationers and travelers.

The San Juan Island group asked that an informational handout be offered at the Anacortes terminal, giving tips on how to travel in the islands. Also, they asked for cameras that show lots B & C as well as A. There was lots of interest in web tools, and some concern over the extra time it will take to process reservations.

Brian noted that the timeline shown in the handout packet will be very different based on this feedback; the current timeline shows implementation after the summer of 2014, but that appears to be changing. WSF will have a better idea of the new timeline soon and will bring that before the group.

Summary, Next Steps, and Questions

Heather Rogers, BERK & Associates

Heather mentioned March 13 as a possible next meeting date, and again encouraged everyone to join the Google Group. She then asked the group if they had any other questions.

Questions & Comments

1. (Bill Pike) I want to voice support for the idea that you've been championing most of the afternoon: educating people in Anacortes, on the web, a variable message sign, a handout at the booth that tells you how to get home from the islands; give people a heads up.
In Phase 1 we installed a TAR at Anacortes. We can have up to 80 minutes of messages on there to give people information on customs, etc.
You have to be in your car listening to your radio to hear it, then once you get to the islands you can't access it. Just a simple handout would make life easier.
We have talked about that; we will look at it.

2. (Gordon Jonasson) What is the frequency of the TAR in Anacortes?
It has not been activated yet, but it will be 530 AM.
3. (Cass Clark) You give everybody a receipt; can helpful information be printed up with the receipt somehow?
That's a good suggestion.

Anonymous Comments

1. Since the group was so in favor of no eastbound reservations from Lopez, I didn't want to say anything. But I am concerned that not doing reservations eastbound from Shaw and Lopez will be confusing for tourists.

Public Comments

2. Thank you for spending your time to participate in this process. I'm glad that Lopez is off the table eastbound and that Lopez committee members will continue to be involved with this group. I'm glad you were open to Susan being Skyped in, and allowing proxies, otherwise any important decision about Lopez would have been made while only 3 of the 7 Lopez representatives were here. I think you ought to allow proxies; it is important that someone who is up to speed on the process should be able to speak for those that cannot make it.
The concern for us is someone coming in who has never been part of the conversation; if someone has been properly engaged, they can act as a proxy, with that caveat.

Conclusion

David thanked everyone for participating. Meeting was adjourned.

Group Members

Present	Name of Group Member	Representing
	Mike Aley	Orcas Island
X	Carol Anderson	San Juan Island
	Kathy Booth	Lopez Island
X	John Brantigan	Shaw Island
X	Ken Burtness	Lopez Island
X	Cass Clark	Lopez Island
X	Jim Corenman	San Juan Island
X	David Dubbell	San Juan Island
	Lance Evans	Orcas Island
X	Tony Ghazel	Orcas Island
X	Wally Gudgell	Orcas Island
	John Hess	San Juan Island
X	Deborah Hopkins	San Juan Island

X	Clark Johnson	Lopez Island
	Mark Lione	Anacortes
X	Pat McKay	San Juan Island
	John MacLeod	Orcas Island
X	Bill Pike	Mount Vernon
	John Poletti	Orcas Island
X	Howie Rosenfeld	San Juan Island
	Margot Shaw	Orcas Island
X	Jamie Stephens (Gordon Jonasson)	Lopez Island
	Mike Stolmeier	Orcas Island
	Terresa Sundstrom	San Juan Island
	Sally Thomsen	San Juan Island
X	Larry Vandermay	Orcas Island
X	John Whetten (Beverly Zapalac)	Lopez Island
X	Susan Young (via Skype)	Lopez Island

Terminal Representatives

- Melissa Johnson, San Juan Islands Terminal Manager
- Zach Akin, Friday Harbor Terminal Agent
- Kathy Keller, Lopez Terminal Agent
- Mary Russell, Orcas Terminal Agent
- Margaret Russell, Orcas Terminal Agent
- Ron Rebman, Orcas Terminal Agent

Project Team

- David Moseley, WSDOT Assistant Secretary
- George Capacci, WSF Deputy Chief
- Marta Coursey, WSF Director of Communications
- Dwight Hutchinson, WSF VRS Manager
- Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations
- Leonard Smith, WSF Operations Manager
- Heather Rogers, BERK & Associates
- Rachel Waitt, WSF Communications Staff